

## Śrīharṣa on Two Paradoxes of Inquiry

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In the *Meno* 80d-e, Meno and Socrates pose a paradox of inquiry.<sup>1</sup> When we seek to find out something through inquiry, either we already know what we are looking for, or we do not. If we already know what we are looking for, then our inquiry is pointless: we can gain no new knowledge by inquiring. If we don't know what we are searching for, then we cannot successfully inquire either. First, even if we were to discover our object of inquiry, we wouldn't be able to recognize it as that object. Second, we won't even know what to look for in the first place. In either case, our inquiry is pointless. This is paradoxical: we often do gain new knowledge by inquiring, so inquiry doesn't seem pointless. The aim of this essay is to consider paradoxes of this kind in a different context: in the context of the first millennium South Asia.<sup>2</sup>

My focus will be on the 12<sup>th</sup> century Sanskrit philosopher and poet Śrīharṣa.<sup>3</sup> His only surviving philosophical work is *A Confection of Refutation* (*Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā*, henceforth the *Refutation*). In a few parts of that text, Śrīharṣa addresses a version of Meno's paradox that was explicitly discussed by two earlier Sanskrit philosophers, Śabarāsvāmin (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE) and Śaṅkara (8<sup>th</sup> century CE). Both these thinkers propose a solution to the paradox. I will show how Śrīharṣa rejects this solution, and splits the old paradox into two: the *paradox of triviality* and the *paradox of incoherence*. I will argue that both these paradoxes are connected to Śrīharṣa's broader pessimism about the possibility of successful philosophical inquiry into certain subject-matters.

A bit more background on Śrīharṣa is necessary to see where that pessimism arises from. Śrīharṣa is a defender of non-dualistic Vedānta, a view that emerges from a certain reading of the Upaniṣads, which are the last part of the Vedic corpus and therefore sometimes called “*vedānta*” (literally, “the end of the Veda”). Non-dualistic Vedāntins accept a form of monism:

NON-DUALISM. There is only a single entity that ultimately exists (*paramārthasat*), i.e., exists independently of our attitudes like beliefs, desires, judgements and so on: namely, consciousness (*vijñāna*).

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<sup>1</sup> For a translation of the passage, see Cooper (1997, p. 880). For helpful discussions of the paradox in the secondary literature, see Fine (1992, 2014), McCabe (2009), and Scott (1994, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> The only other paper that discusses such paradoxes in the South Asian context is by Carpenter and Ganeri (2010). At various places, my reading of Śrīharṣa will differ from theirs: they neither distinguish the two paradoxes of inquiry that I distinguish in this essay, nor connect these paradoxes with Śrīharṣa's broader project of defending non-dualistic Vedānta.

<sup>3</sup> For an introduction to Śrīharṣa, see Das (2018). Other helpful discussions of Śrīharṣa's views in metaphysics and epistemology include Granoff (1978), Phillips (1999), and Ram-Prasad (2002).

Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika philosophers reject NON-DUALISM. They make two claims. The first is an *ontological* claim: there are many kinds of entities—particulars and properties—that ultimately exist. The Vaiśeṣika metaphysicians offer a list of six ontological categories—substance (*dravya*), quality (*guṇa*), motion (*karman*), universals (*sāmānya*), ultimate differentiators (*antyaviśeṣa*), and inherence (*samavāya*)—that is supposed to exhaust everything that ultimately exists. The second is an *epistemological* claim: our ordinary methods of knowing can help us know various facts about ultimately existent objects. The Nyāya epistemologists—the Naiyāyikas—offer us a list of four methods of knowing (*pramāṇa*)—perception, inference, analogy, and testimony—which are supposed to give us epistemic access to the constituents of ultimate reality.

In the *Refutation*, Śrīharṣa undermines both these claims: he dismantles the definitions (*lakṣaṇa*) that the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika thinkers offer for their preferred ontological and epistemological categories. Importantly, however, Śrīharṣa doesn't offer any positive argument for NON-DUALISM. Rather, his own commitment to NON-DUALISM leads him to embrace:

ANTI-RATIONALISM. There cannot be any successful rational inquiry into the question of what ultimately exists.

For Śrīharṣa, our ordinary methods of knowing like perception, inference, and testimony cannot yield any knowledge about the nature of ultimate reality. We can only gain an insight into the nature of ultimate reality through a state of direct, non-conceptual awareness that arises after a much more radical epistemic transformation has taken place. I will show how Śrīharṣa's two paradoxes of inquiry are intimately connected to his ANTI-RATIONALISM.

Here is the plan for the rest of the paper. In §1, I will lay out the version of Meno's paradox that Śabara and Śaṅkara discuss, and their solution to it. In §2, I will reconstruct the first of Śrīharṣa's paradoxes of inquiry: the paradox of triviality. In §3, I will reconstruct his second paradox: the paradox of incoherence. In §4, I will say how these two paradoxes are connected to Śrīharṣa's ANTI-RATIONALISM.

## 1. Meno in South Asia

Both Śabara and Śaṅkara were commentators on earlier *sūtra* texts. Śabara wrote a commentary (*bhāṣya*) on the *Pūrvamīmāṃsāsūtra* (PMS), a *sūtra* text attributed to Jaimini. This text is concerned with the task of interpreting those sections of the Veda which prescribe various rituals. Since these rituals give rise to good outcomes (like heavenly bliss), they (along with their constituents and their intermediate results) are called *dharma*, defined sometimes as “something that promotes the good” (*śreyaskara*). Śabara's commentary on the *Pūrvamīmāṃsāsūtra* paved the way for the development of the Mīmāṃsā text-tradition through later figures like Kumārila Bhaṭṭa and Prabhākara Miśra. In contrast, Śaṅkara's commentary was on the *Brahmasūtra* (BS), a *sūtra* text attributed to Bādarāyaṇa. Unlike the *Pūrvamīmāṃsāsūtra*, the *Brahmasūtra* offers an interpretation of

the early Upaniṣads. These Upaniṣads claim that *brahman* is the origin of the universe, describing it at various places as consciousness, as non-dual, as all-pervading, and as eternal. The *Brahmasūtra* seeks to offer a unified account of what these early Upaniṣads teach us about the nature of *brahman*, the relationship between *brahman* and the self (*ātman*), the means to knowing *brahman*, and the path to liberation (*mokṣa*), i.e., complete freedom from suffering. Śaṅkara’s commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*—along with his commentaries on some of the early Upaniṣads—laid the foundation for non-dualistic Vedānta. Śrīharṣa himself is a later (and perhaps unorthodox) defender of this view.

Both the *Pūrvamīmāṃsāsūtra* and the *Brahmasūtra* begin by naming a desire for awareness (*jñānāsā*) as the driving motivation for their respective projects of inquiry. In this context, a state of awareness (*jñāna*) is a non-factive, occurrent mental state like an experience or a thought that represents the world as being a certain way.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the very first *sūtra* in the *Pūrvamīmāṃsāsūtra* says:

PMS 1.1.1. Then, therefore, there is a desire to be aware of *dharma*.<sup>5</sup>

Śabara explains that the point of PMS 1.1.1 is to lay out the subject-matter of the *Pūrvamīmāṃsāsūtra*. The aim of the text is to lay down a system of scriptural hermeneutics that explains what the Veda says about *dharma*. So, its aim is to investigate what *dharma* is, what its defining characteristics are, which methods serve as sources of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) about *dharma*, which methods fail to yield knowledge about *dharma*, what an instance of *dharma* is for the sake of (the agent or the sacrifice), and so on. Since the remaining *sūtras* address these questions, the theses to be stated by those *sūtras* are summarized through this first *sūtra*.

Echoing PMS 1.1.1, the very first *sūtra* in the *Brahmasūtra* says:

BS 1.1.1 Then, therefore, there is a desire to be aware of *brahman*.<sup>6</sup>

Mirroring Śabara, Śaṅkara explains that the point of BS 1.1.1 is to state the purpose of the *Brahmasūtra*: namely, to give rise to a particular kind of awareness of *brahman*. *Brahman* is something one should desire to apprehend by means of a state of awareness (*jñāna*)—an experience or a thought—that has the status of being a source of knowledge (*pramāṇa*).<sup>7</sup> Why?

<sup>4</sup> Typically, the Sanskrit term “*jñāna*” is translated as “cognition.” This is misleading because, typically, philosophers and cognitive scientists take cognitive states to be mental states like beliefs and judgements whose contents can be directly used for theoretical reasoning and verbal reports and for controlling action. But, according to some Sanskrit philosophers, non-conceptual perceptual experiences aren’t like this. So, it is better to use a slightly broader term like “awareness.” It is worth remembering that, in English, even though constructions like “*S* is aware that *p*” ascribe factive mental states insofar as they entail that *p*, constructions of the form, “*S* is aware of *o* as *F*” don’t ascribe factive mental states insofar as they don’t entail that *o* is *F*.

<sup>5</sup> PMS 1.1.1: *athāto dharmajñānāsā* |

<sup>6</sup> BS 1.1.1: *athāto brahmajñānāsā* |

<sup>7</sup> Throughout this essay, I shall keep separate two notions: the notion of *jñāna* and the notion of *pramāṇa*. The Sanskrit word “*pramāṇa*” is ambiguous: it refers to either (i) an instrument of learning or knowledge-acquisition, i.e.,

The answer is simple: such a state of awareness can destroy undesirable mental states, such as our ignorance (*avidyā*) about the nature of the self and its relationship to the world, which cause us to be caught up in the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*).

Both Śābara and Śaṅkara note that this gives rise to a puzzle: one shouldn't have the desire to be aware of either *dharma* or *brahman*. Śābara poses the puzzle as follows.

Would *dharma* be well-established (*prasiddha*) or not well-established? If it were well-established, then it wouldn't be something that one should desire to be aware of. If it weren't well-established, it wouldn't be so *a fortiori*. Therefore, this discussion of the desire to be aware of *dharma* is without a purpose.<sup>8</sup>

Śaṅkara repeats the passage almost verbatim.

Still, would that *brahman* be well-established or not well-established? If it were well-established, it wouldn't be something one should a desire to be aware of. If it were not well-established, it is not possible for it to be something one desires to be aware of.<sup>9</sup>

Here is one of way of reconstructing the general argument, interpreting the expression “well-established” in these texts as something like “an intentional object of awareness.”<sup>10</sup> Take any object of inquiry *o*.

P1. Either *o* is well-established for the inquirer, or it is not.

P2. If *o* is well-established for the inquirer, then it is already an intentional object (*viśaya*) of their awareness.

P3. If *o* is already an intentional object of the inquirer's awareness, then they should not have a desire to be aware of *o*.

P4. If *o* is not well-established for the inquirer, then it is not an intentional object (*viśaya*) of their awareness.

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an instrument (*karana*) like perception, inference or testimony by which one gains knowledge, or (ii) a state of learning or knowledge-acquisition, i.e., a state of awareness in undergoing which one gains knowledge. To capture this ambiguity, I will translate the term as “source of knowledge.” Since a state of awareness is non-factive, it needn't necessarily be a source of knowledge in this second sense. The distinction between states of awareness and states of learning will be significant for us when we consider the paradox of incoherence in §3. It is worth noting that Carpenter and Ganeri (2010) don't keep these notions separate.

<sup>8</sup> PMSBh 1.11.1-3 ad PMS 1.1.1: *dharmah prasiddho vā syād aprasiddho vā | sa cet prasiddhah, na jijñāsyah | athāprasiddhah, natarām | tad etad anarthakam dharmajijñāsāprakaraṇam |*

<sup>9</sup> BSBh 78.1-79.2 ad BS 1.1.1: *tat punar brahma prasiddham aprasiddham vā syāt | yadi prasiddham na jijñāsītyam | athāprasiddham naiva śakyam jijñāsītum iti |*

<sup>10</sup> This interpretation is supported by Kumārila's interpretation of the text in his *Commentary in Verse (Ślokavārtika)* (ŚV v. 124 ad PMS 1.1.1): “It is possible to be aware of a well-established object, but such an object is not desired because it is well-established. But, since that is not possible for something that isn't well-established, [Śābara] has said, ‘It is not so *a fortiori*.’” (*prasiddhah śakyate jñātum prasiddhatvāt tu nesyaite | aprasiddhas tv aśakyatvāt natarām ity abravīt | |*)

P5. If *o* is not an intentional object (*viṣaya*) of the inquirer’s awareness, then they cannot have a desire to be aware of *o*.

P6. If an inquirer cannot have a desire to be aware of *o*, they should not have a desire to be aware of *o*.

C. Therefore, the inquirer should not have a desire to be aware of *o*.

If the argument is sound, then an inquirer shouldn’t have any desire to gain any awareness regarding any object of inquiry. But, given the assumption that it is (instrumentally) rational for an agent to engage in an inquiry only if they can rationally have such a desire, it will follow that (instrumentally) rational inquiry is impossible.

Both Śābara and Śaṅkara reject this argument by rejecting P3. Śābara says:

On the contrary, this treatise does have a purpose; for learned people disagree about *dharma*. Some have said that *dharma* is one thing, while others have said that it is another. Now, a person who undertakes action without investigating—insofar as he chooses one of these things—would be unsuccessful, and would attain an undesirable outcome. That is why one should have a desire to be aware of *dharma*.<sup>11</sup>

Here is how Śābara’s commentator Kumārila and his sub-commentators gloss Śābara’s point.<sup>12</sup> Amongst ordinary people, *dharma* is generally accepted as whatever promotes the good. But, even though we may be aware in the abstract of *dharma*, we are uncertain about its specific characteristics because experts disagree about it. There are two kinds of disagreements: about the nature of *dharma*, and about how we can gain knowledge about *dharma*. First, learned people don’t agree about the nature of *dharma*. For example, since the Brahmanical thinkers acknowledge the epistemic authority of the Veda, they think that sacrificial rites like *agnihotra*—which are recommended by the Veda—are *dharma*. In contrast, the Buddhists, who reject the epistemic authority of the Veda, think that other actions—such as worshipping Buddhist shrines like a *stūpa* (*caityavandanā*)—constitute *dharma*. Second, learned people also disagree about which source of knowledge gives us access to *dharma*. While some Brahmanical thinkers like Mīmāṃsakas regard Vedic injunctions to be the sole source of our knowledge about *dharma*, others like the Vaiśeṣikas might claim that yogic perception—i.e., the kind of supramundane perception that yogins undergo in a state of meditative absorption—could also yield knowledge about *dharma*. But we cannot just act without figuring out which of these views about *dharma* are correct. If we were to arbitrarily choose one of these conceptions of *dharma* and performed the actions that are

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<sup>11</sup> PMSBh 11.3-13.2 ad PMS 1.1.1: *athavā ’rthavat | dharmam prati hi vipratipannā bahuvidah kecid anyam dharmam āhuḥ kecid anyam | so ’yam avicārya pravartamānaḥ kaṃcid evopādadaṅ vihanayeta | anartham ca rchet | tasmād dharmo jijñāsitavyaḥ |* Here, the printed text has “*kecid*” instead of the underlined “*kaṃcid*”; following Frauwallner (1968), I have corrected it to “*kaṃcid*.”

<sup>12</sup> See ŚV vv. 125-6 ad PMS 1.1.1. Kumārila’s commentators Uṃveka Bhaṭṭa, Sucarita Miśra, Pārthasārathi Miśra explain these two verses in further detail (ŚVTṬ 28.14-23; ŚVK 57.23-58.15; NRA 33.17-34.8).

recommended as *dharmā* on that view, then we would run the risk of bringing about some harm to ourselves, and of attaining some undesirable result. That is why we should desire to resolve our uncertainties about *dharmā*, before acting, by gaining awareness about the specific characteristics of *dharmā*.

Śaṅkara follows in Śābara's footsteps. His solution to the puzzle comes in two parts. The first part concedes that we are indeed aware of the existence of *brahman*.

We reply. First, *brahman*—whose nature is eternal, pure, conscious, and free, and who is omniscient and endowed with all powers—exists. For characteristics like purity are understood as the meanings of the expression “*brahman*” when it is etymologically explained, since these conform to the meaning of the verbal root “*bṛh*” [from which that expression is derived]. Moreover, the existence of *brahman* is well-established because it is the self (*ātman*); for everyone is aware of the existence of *brahman*, but doesn't undergo an awareness, “I don't exist.” This is because, if the existence of the self weren't well-established, then every person would undergo the awareness, “I don't exist.” And the self is *brahman*.<sup>13</sup>

As Śaṅkara's sub-commentator Vācaspati explains the passage, there are three distinct arguments here (though I can see only two).<sup>14</sup> According to the first, a person who has studied the Veda together with other sciences like grammar, etymology, etc. (which are necessary for Vedic exegesis) possesses some awareness of the nature of *brahman* on the basis of the Upaniṣads. The Upaniṣads literally state that *brahman* is endowed with characteristics like eternality, purity, and so on. In doing so, they also convey—not literally, but by implication (*tātparyā*) or by a relation of secondary reference (*lakṣaṇā*)—the true nature of *brahman*: namely, that it is free from decay, impurity, and so on. Second, the etymology of the expression “*brahman*” yields another kind of awareness about the nature of *brahman*. This expression is derived from the root “*bṛh*” that refers to growth or increase. Thus, the expression itself can be taken to refer to some form of excellence (*atiśaya*) that, in turn, may be interpreted in terms of characteristics like eternality (*nityatva*), purity (*śuddha*), and so on, in light of the Upaniṣads. The third argument is the most significant. It starts out with the premise—explicitly confirmed by the Upaniṣads again—that *brahman* is nothing other than the self. The self is the referent of the reflexive pronoun “I.” But, since no one thinks, “I don't exist,” no one denies the existence of the self. So, everyone is already committed to the existence of *brahman* insofar as it is the self. These three arguments—only the latter two of which are explicitly given by Śaṅkara—imply not only that we are already aware of the nature of *brahman*, but also that we are already committed to its existence.

<sup>13</sup> BSBh 79.2-81.2 ad BS 1.1.1: *ucyate—asti tāvad brahma nityaśuddhabuddhamuktasvabhāvaṃ, sarvajñaṃ, sarvaśaktisamanvitam | brahmaśabdasya hi vyutpādyamānasya nityaśuddhatvādayo 'rthāḥ pratīyante, brhater dhātor arthānugamāt | sarvasyātmatvāc ca brahmāstitvāprasiddhiḥ | sarvo hyātmāstitvaṃ pratyeti, na nāham asmīti | yadi hi nātmāstitvāprasiddhiḥ syāt sarvo loko nāham asmīti pratīyāt | ātmā ca brahma |*

<sup>14</sup> See Bhā 79.11ff.

How does that help with the puzzle? Śaṅkara continues:

[The opponent:] In that case, if Brahman is well-established as the self amongst ordinary people, then it is indeed an object of awareness. So, once again, it will follow that one shouldn't have a desire for awareness about it.

[Reply:] No, because there is disagreement about its specific characteristics. Ordinary people and the Lokāyatas think that the self is just the body characterised by consciousness. Others think that the conscious senses alone are the self. Others think that the inner sense (*manas*) is the self. Some [e.g., the Yogācāra Buddhists] think that it is just consciousness that is momentary. Others [e.g., the Mādhyamika Buddhists] think that it is empty. Even others [i.e., Mīmāṃsakas] think that there exists an agent and a subject of experience who is distinct from the body and who is entrenched in the cycle of rebirth. Some [i.e., the Sāṅkhya] think that there is only a subject of experience, not an agent. Some others [i.e., the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas] think that there is an omniscient and omnipotent Lord that is distinct from that [subject]. Others [i.e., the Vedāntins] think that the Lord is the self who is the subject. In this way, many people disagree with each other, relying on (good) arguments and testimony as well as defective ones. A person who accepts any one of these views without investigation would be prevented from attaining the highest good and would attain some undesirable outcome. That is why, by way of stating a desire for awareness regarding *brahman*, an inquiry into the statements of Vedānta—which is assisted by auxiliary tools, i.e., arguments compatible with those texts, and which has as its purpose the highest good—is being initiated.<sup>15</sup>

The argument is the same as Śābara's. Even though we are already committed to the existence of the self (and therefore also to the existence of *brahman*), there are many conflicting opinions regarding the nature of the self. Is the self the conscious body, the senses, or just the inner sense? Or is it merely a subject distinct from the body, who experiences pleasure and pain, or merely an agent who performs actions, or both? And is there a divine self, an omniscient and omnipotent God-like being—the Lord (*īśvara*)—who is distinct from the subject of experience? Since philosophers can't seem to agree on these questions about the self and offer all kinds of reasoning and testimony—both good and bad—in support of their claims, there needs to be an

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<sup>15</sup> BSBh 81.3-83.3 ad BS 1.1.1: *yadi tarhi loke brahmātmatvena prasiddham asti tato jñāamevety ajijñāsyatvaṃ punar āpannam | na | tadviśeṣaṃ prati vipratipatteḥ | dehamātram caitanyaviśiṣṭam ātmeti prakṛtā janā laukāyatikāś ca pratipannāḥ | indriyāny eva cetanāny ātmety apare | mana ity anye | vijñānamātram kṣaṇikam ity eke | sūnyam ity apare | asti dehādvyatiriktaḥ saṃsārī kartā, bhoktety apare | bhoktaiva kevalam na kartety eke | asti tadvyatirikta īśvaraḥ sarvajñaḥ sarvaśaktir iti kecit | ātmā sa bhokturyapare | evaṃ bahavo vipratipannā yuktivākyatadābhāsasamāśrayāḥ santah | tatrāvicārya yatkiñcit pratipadyamāno niḥśreyasāt pratihanyetānartham ceyāt | tasmāt brahmajijñāsoḥpanyāsamukhena vedāntavākyamīmāṃsā tadavirodhitarakopakaraṇā niḥśreyasaprayojanā prastūyate |*

investigation into these views, to decide which of these arguments work, which bits of testimony are unreliable, and which views are right in the final analysis. Unless we were to engage in such an investigation, we would not be able to discover the nature of the self. But all these philosophers agree that discovering the nature of the self is the only way of attaining the highest good of human existence, i.e., liberation. So, if we were to arbitrarily pick any one of these views without any inquiry, we might not be able to attain liberation. Or, worse, we might entrench ourselves in a way of life that perpetually brings us suffering. That is why the desire to be aware of these specific characteristics of *brahman*—through an investigation of the Upaniṣadic statements about *brahman* with the help of arguments—is worth having. And that is precisely the desire that the *Brahmasūtra* seeks to satisfy.

It's time to sum up. Both Śābara and Śaṅkara reject P3: the claim that if an inquirer is already aware of an object of inquiry *o*, they shouldn't desire any further awareness of it. Both point out that the kind of awareness that we desire when we inquire into *dharma* or *brahman* isn't the kind of awareness of these things that we already possess. Rather, we wish to learn about the specific characteristics of these things. Without such specific awareness, we run a substantial risk of depriving ourselves certain kinds of desirable outcomes like heavenly bliss or liberation. That is why it is rational for us to have a desire for such a specific awareness.

## 2. The Paradox of Triviality

In the third chapter of the *Refutation*, Śrīharṣa considers two versions of the paradox of inquiry that Śābara and Śaṅkara discuss. There are two distinctive features of Śrīharṣa's paradoxes.

First, they are closely tied to the context of a debate between the theist and the atheist. According to a standard Nyāya classification of debates, debates (*kathā*) can be of three kinds: truth-directed, victory-directed and destructive. A truth-directed debate (*vāda*) aims at the determination of truth: in such a debate, there are two interlocutors who disagree about a thesis *P*, but both of whom wish to determine whether *P* is true. A victory-directed debate (*jalpa*) aims at victory: in such a debate too, there are two disagreeing interlocutors, but they only wish to defeat each other. By contrast, in a destructive debate (*vitandā*), one of the interlocutors has no thesis (or anti-thesis) to defend: their aim is simply to dismantle the opponent's view and defeat them. The debate that Śrīharṣa is considering is probably either truth-directed or victory-directed.<sup>16</sup> In that debate, the theist and the atheist disagree: the theist accepts the existence of an omnipotent and omniscient God-like being called the Lord, and the atheist denies it. Their mutual aim is either to determine whether the Lord exists, or to defeat each other.

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<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, Śrīharṣa suggests that a victory-directed debate should simply be considered as a combination of two destructive debates (KKh §1.171). It is not immediately obvious that he should accept this view, since some features of destructive debates are absent from victory-debates. As we shall see, the second paradox of inquiry that he himself poses affects both truth-directed and victory-debates (i.e., debates where there is genuine disagreement between the two sides), but not destructive debates.

Second, Śrīharṣa wants to focus on a certain kind of inquiry-initiating “what”-question, a question that takes the form, “What is the source of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) with respect to *o*?” Call such a question an *evidence-seeking “what”-question*. The aim of such a question is to challenge one’s interlocutor to adduce some piece of evidence—a source of knowledge—in favour of their thesis. The questioner, then, can proceed to state refutations against that putative source of knowledge. The question that Śrīharṣa is concerned with is a challenge posed by the atheist: “What is the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord’s existence?”

Śrīharṣa’s initial strategy is to distinguish four possible attitudes that one could be expressing by using the interrogative pronoun “what” (*kim*) in such an utterance (KKh §3.1-2).<sup>17</sup> First, they could be expressing a denial (*ākṣepa*): a rejection of the claim that there is a source of knowledge with respect to the Lord’s existence. Second, they could be conveying that something is condemned (*kutsita*): in other words, they might be condemning any putative source of knowledge that the theist puts forward respect to the Lord’s existence. Third, they could be expressing a state of uncertainty (*vitarka*) about whether there is a source of knowledge with respect to the Lord’s existence. Finally, they could simply be asking a question (*praśna*)—and therefore expressing an inquiring attitude—about the source of knowledge with respect to Lord’s existence. Śrīharṣa quickly dismisses the first three options, and focuses on the the fourth option.

He wants to argue for two claims. First, he wants to argue that, in a (truth-directed or victory-directed) debate, in response to an evidence-seeking “what”-question, it is permissible for an interlocutor to offer a trivial answer, e.g., the answer “the source of knowledge with respect to the existence of Lord.” Second, he wants to argue that, in a (truth-directed or victory-directed) debate where there is genuine disagreement between the interlocutors, such an evidence-seeking question cannot be coherently asked at all. The first claim poses the *paradox of triviality*; the second poses the *paradox of incoherence*. In this section, I focus on the paradox of triviality.

## 2.1 The Problem

Take the “what”-question, “What is *o*?”, where “*o*” is either an indefinite or definite description. If “*o*” is an *indefinite* description, then the question is likely about the *kind* of entity that fits the relevant description. The question, “What is a zebra?” may be understood in this way: someone who sincerely asks this question is asking for a characterisation of zebras in general. In contrast, if “*o*” is a *definite* description, it is a question about the unique entity that fits that description. The question, “What is the capital of India?” may be understood in this way: someone who sincerely asks this question wants to know which particular city is the capital of India.

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<sup>17</sup> Throughout this paper, I will refer to Ganganatha Jha’s edition of the *Refutation* (abbreviated by KKh) by citing the text sections in the relevant chapters: so, “§*x*.*y*” will refer to the *y*th section in the *x*th chapter.

The Sanskrit question that the atheist asks, “*īśvarasadbhāve kiṃ pramāṇam?*” could be understood in either way. The expression “*pramāṇam*” (declined in the nominative singular case) could mean either “*a source of knowledge*” or “*the source of knowledge.*” On the first interpretation, the question is, “What is *a source of knowledge* with respect to the Lord’s existence?” This is a question about *the kind of source of knowledge* (*pramāṇasāmānya*), e.g., inference, that establishes the Lord’s existence. On the second interpretation, the question is, “What is *the source of knowledge* with respect to the Lord’s existence?” This is the more natural reading (and indeed the way I’ve been translating it): this is a question about a *particular source of knowledge* (*pramāṇaviśeṣa*), e.g., a particular inference, that establishes the Lord’s existence. Śrīharṣa’s puzzling claim is that, on either of these two interpretations, the trivial response—either “*a source of knowledge* with respect to the Lord’s existence” or “*the source of knowledge* with respect to the Lord’s existence”—would count as an adequate answer to the relevant question.

Here is his argument. At the first stage, Śrīharṣa begins with a triad of principles.

It is also not the fourth [alternative]. Certainly, from the expression “what” that has a question as its meaning, the status of some entity as the object of a desire for awareness (*jijñāsyamānatā*) is apprehended. And, since [the word “what”] is accompanied by the word “*a/the source of knowledge*” in this context, [the desire] is apprehended as having as its intentional object a source of knowledge. Further, whatever is the intentional object of a question, that is to be stated by the respondent.<sup>18</sup>

Here are the three principles.

THE QUESTION-DESIRE PRINCIPLE. Any “what”-question that takes the form, “What is *o?*”, expresses a desire for awareness about *o*.

THE QUESTION-OBJECT PRINCIPLE. If any “what”-question expresses a desire for awareness about *o*, then *o* is the intentional object (*viśaya*) of that question.

THE ADEQUACY CONDITION FOR ANSWERS. An answer to a “what”-question is adequate just in case it correctly states (or picks out) the intentional object of that question.

Together, these three principles entail that an answer to the “what”-question, “What is *o?*” is adequate just in case it correctly states (or picks out) *o*. Next, apply this to the two interpretations of the question that the atheist asks.

So, is this question intended to have as its intentional object a kind of source of knowledge (*pramāṇasāmānya*) with respect to the Lord’s existence, or a particular [instance] of that (*tadviśeṣa*)? If it were the first option, then the answer “*a source of knowledge* with respect

<sup>18</sup> KKh §3.3: *nāpi caturthaḥ, praśnārthāt khalu kiṃśabdāt kasyacit padārthasya jijñāsyamānatā pratīyate | sā ceha pramāṇapadasamabhiyāhārāt pramāṇaviśayiṇī pratīyate | yadvīśayas ca prasnas tad uttaravādinā abhidheyam |*

to the Lord's existence" (*īśvarasadbhāve pramāṇam*) would follow. For, whatever is the intentional object of a question, that is to be stated. And the question is directed at a kind of source of knowledge, and that indeed is stated by the expression "a source of knowledge." If it were the second option, even then the very same answer, "the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord's existence" (*īśvarasadbhāve pramāṇam*) would follow. Just as the expression "the source of knowledge" conveys a particular [source of knowledge] in the utterance of the question, so too [does it convey the same particular source of knowledge] in the utterance of the answer.<sup>19</sup>

Suppose the atheist's question is, "What is *a* source of knowledge about divine existence?" Then, it is naturally understood as being about the kind of source of knowledge that proves the Lord's existence. Then, given THE ADEQUACY CONDITION FOR ANSWERS, the answer "a source of knowledge with respect to the Lord's existence" would be adequate; for that *indefinite* description does correctly state (or pick out) the kind of entity that the question is about. Alternatively, suppose the atheist's question is, "What is *the* source of knowledge with respect to the Lord's existence?" Then, it is about a particular source of knowledge that proves the Lord's existence. The atheist's use of the definite description "the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord's existence" must pick out the particular source of knowledge that the question is about. Thus, again, given THE ADEQUACY CONDITION FOR ANSWERS, the answer "the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord's existence," would be adequate. But, intuitively, both these results seem wrong: both answers are trivial and therefore seem inadequate. This is the paradox of triviality.

This is a version of the puzzle that Śābara and Śaṅkara were discussing. The implicit claim that, to initiate an inquiry into anything by means of a "what"-question, the questioner must already be aware of that object. Otherwise, they won't be able to pick it out by means of a definite or indefinite description. But, then, answering the question in a non-trivial manner is unnecessary, given that the questioner already possesses the relevant awareness.

## 2.2 Objections and Replies

A natural response to this puzzle is to reject THE ADEQUACY CONDITION FOR ANSWERS. This condition says that an answer to a "what"-question is adequate just in case it correctly states (or picks out) the intentional object of that question. But this, we might think, is too permissive: it allows even uninformative answers to be adequate responses to "what"-questions. The trivial answers that Śrīharṣa considers are uninformative because they merely reuse the description that the questioner uses. While such an answer would indeed refer to the kind of source of knowledge that establishes the Lord's existence, or some specific instance of that kind, they don't give the

<sup>19</sup> KKh §3.3: *tad ayam īśvarasadbhāve pramāṇasāmānyaviśayas tadviśeṣaviśayo vā 'bhīpretah? ādyaś cet, īśvarasadbhāve pramāṇam ityevottaram āpadyeta, yadvīśayo hi praśnas tad abhidheyam | pramāṇasāmānyaviśayas ca praśnah, tac ca pramāṇasābdenābhīdhīyata eva | atha dvitīyaḥ, tathā 'pīśvarasadbhāve pramāṇam ity evottaram āpadyeta | yathā praśnavākye pramāṇasābdo viśeṣaparas tathottaravākye 'pi |*

questioner any information that they didn't already possess. So, we may be tempted to revise THE ADEQUACY CONDITION FOR ANSWERS.

THE REVISED ADEQUACY CONDITION FOR ANSWERS. An answer to a "what"-question is adequate just in case:

- (a) it correctly states (or picks out) the intentional object of that question, and
- (b) it is sufficiently informative in the context of the conversation.

Here, (b) is the new condition: to count as an adequate response to a "what"-question, not only must an answer correctly state (or pick out) the intentional object of that question, but it must also be sufficiently informative in the context of the conversation. Śrīharṣa argues that, no matter how we try to spell out the notion of informativity, the same problems will arise again.

### 2.2.1 Informativity: First Pass

Take one proposal about informativity.

INFORMATIVITY I. An answer to a "what"-question, "What is *o*?" is sufficiently informative in the context of conversation just in case it picks out a specific alternative from amongst a range of salient alternatives that could (by lights of the questioner) satisfy the description "*o*."

Suppose someone asks me, "What is the capital of India?" In the relevant context of conversation, my interlocutor is uncertain about which city could be capital of India: about whether it is Chennai, or Kolkata, or Mumbai, or New Delhi, or... The answer "New Delhi" is sufficiently informative because it refers to a specific city that is amongst those contextually salient cities.

Śrīharṣa indirectly addresses this proposal while entertaining a response from the atheist. In reply to the theist's trivial answers, the atheist might persist in asking further questions about *which* particular source of knowledge establishes the Lord's existence. Initially, Śrīharṣa notes that this won't succeed for the same reasons as earlier.

[The opponent:] What is this particular?

[Reply:] Even this question has as its intentional object a particular, because the expression "what" is grammatically apposite to the expression "[this] particular." And, given this, "[this] particular," would indeed be an [apt] answer.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> KKCh §3.4: *ko 'sau viśeṣa iti cen na, pūrvavaduttaratvat | asyāpi praśnasya viśeṣo viśayaḥ, kiṃśabdasya viśeṣaśabdena sāmānādhikaranyāt | tathā ca sati viśeṣa ity evottaraṃ syāt |*

The point is the same as earlier. If the atheist is able to pick out the particular source of knowledge that (on the theist’s view) establishes the Lord’s existence by means of the description “this particular”, then the theist could adequately answer their question simply by offering a trivial reply “this particular.” This is because, here, that trivial answer correctly states (or picks out) precisely the specific source of knowledge that the atheist’s question is about. But, in response, the atheist clarifies their view.

[The opponent:] Let this be the case. By means of the expression “particular,” an indeterminate arbitrary particular is not intended to be spoken of, but rather a unique individual [is intended]. The intention (*tātṭparya*) underlying the expression “particular” is [to refer to] that [individual]. Therefore, the meaning of the question is, “What is this unique individual source of knowledge?” And, in response to that [question], it is appropriate to state such an individual source of knowledge, and not [to indulge in] this kind of prattle.<sup>21</sup>

This argument presupposes something like INFORMATIVITY I. When the atheist asks, “What is this particular?” their question is directed at a unique individual: a unique source of knowledge that serves as proof for the Lord’s existence. So, an adequate—and therefore sufficiently informative—answer to that question must pick out a specific source of knowledge amongst a range of contextually salient alternative sources of knowledge that could establish the Lord’s existence. By this standard of appropriateness, the creationist’s answer “the argument from intelligent design” might be an adequate answer, because it singles out a specific inference amongst the salient sources of knowledge that could establish divine existence. But, according to the opponent, the trivial answer “this particular” isn’t adequate, since it doesn’t pick any such specific source of knowledge.

Predictably, Śrīharṣa disagrees.

[Reply:] This is not so. For, even in response to this [question], the answer could indeed be “[this] particular.” Just as the intention (*tātṭparya*) underlying the expression “particular,” which occurs in the utterance of the question, is [to refer] to an individual source of knowledge whose nature is distinguished from everything [else], so too is the case for [the expression “particular”] that occurs in the utterance of the answer. And, if this is so, the following is appropriately said: whatever intentional object is intended to be

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<sup>21</sup> KKh §3.4: *syād etat—viśeṣaśabdena na viśeṣamātram anirdhāritam atra vivakṣitam, kintv asādhāraṇī vyaktis tatra viśeṣaśabdasya tātṭparyam | tasmāt kā ’sāv asādhāraṇī pramāṇavyaktir iti praśnārthaḥ | tatra ca tādr̥śyāḥ pramāṇavyakter abhidhānam uttaram yuktam, naivaṃvidhāḥ pralāpā iti |*

referred to by your utterance of the question, that very intentional object is conveyed by our utterance of the answer.<sup>22</sup>

Take the question, “What is the capital of India?” asked in a context where the salient alternatives are Chennai, Kolkata, Mumbai, New Delhi, and so forth. We can agree that the definite description “the capital of India” picks out—and is intended to pick out—the specific city that is in fact the capital of India, i.e., New Delhi. So, the trivial answer “the capital of India” does pick out a specific city amongst the contextually salient cities that could be the capital of India. The same is true of the question, “What is the particular source of knowledge that establishes the Lord’s existence?” If INFORMATIVITY I is right, then the trivial answer “the particular source of knowledge that establishes the Lord’s existence” is informative because this definite description refers to a specific source of knowledge that in fact establishes the Lord’s existence. So, Śrīharṣa would argue, it is able to pick out a specific alternative amongst the contextually salient sources of knowledge that could establish the Lord’s existence. So, THE REVISED ADEQUACY CONDITION FOR ANSWERS, taken together with INFORMATIVITY I, is unable to avoid the problem of triviality.

### 2.2.2 Informativity: Second Pass

We might not be satisfied with Śrīharṣa’s response. Suppose I am asked the question, “What is the capital of India?” in a context where the questioner doesn’t know which of the salient alternatives is the capital of India. Then, the trivial answer “the capital of India” may pick out New Delhi but cannot help the questioner distinguish New Delhi from the other contextually salient Indian cities that, by their lights, could be the capital of India. This, we may surmise, makes this answer uninformative. So, we might want to restate our account of informativity in a different way.

INFORMATIVITY II. An answer to a “what”-question is sufficiently informative in a context of conversation just in case it gives the questioner the capacity to distinguish a specific alternative from other contextually salient alternatives that could (by lights of the questioner) satisfy the description “*o*.”

Śrīharṣa suggests that this strategy too won’t succeed.

On this view, the “what”-question, “What is the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord’s existence?” boils down to a multiple-choice question, “Is the inference the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord’s existence, or is it perception, or is it testimony, or is it...?” An adequate

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<sup>22</sup> KKh §3.4: *naitad evam, yato ’trāpi viśeṣa ity evottaram, yathā praśnavākyagatasya viśeṣaśabdasya sarvato vyāvṛttasvarūpāyām pramānavyaktāu tātparyam tathottaravākyasthitasyāpi | evam ca sati yatra viśaye praśnavākyasya tātparyam tad evāsmākam uttaravākyena pratipāditam iti yuktam uktam |*

answer to such a multiple-choice question will indeed help the questioner distinguish the relevant source of knowledge from the other alternative sources of knowledge. But, if this multiple-choice question is truly the question that the atheist wishes to ask, then they should simply ask that question. But the multiple-choice question is quite easy for the theist to answer: they could just say that inference is the source of knowledge that establishes the Lord’s existence. But, then, if the theist again asks, “What is the inference that establishes the Lord’s existence?” the same dilemma that Śrīharṣa raised for the original question could be raised again: is it a question about the kind of inference that establishes the Lord’s existence, or about the particular inference that establishes the Lord’s existence? Śrīharṣa puts the point as follows.

Suppose you think, “The person who asks, ‘What is the source of knowledge with respect to this?’ has the following intention: ‘With respect to this object, is inference the source of knowledge, or something else?’” Even in response to that, our answer is “inference.”

[The atheist:] What is that inference?

[Reply:] Does this question have as its intentional object any arbitrary inference, or a particular inference? Having posed these alternatives, an answer is to be stated just as in the case of the question about the source of knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

We can spell this out further. Either the unrevised ADEQUACY CONDITION FOR ANSWERS is right, or THE REVISED ADEQUACY CONDITION FOR ANSWERS is right. If the unrevised ADEQUACY CONDITION FOR ANSWERS is right, then an adequate answer to a “what”-question doesn’t have to be sufficiently informative in the context of conversation. So, a trivial answer like “that inference” will count as adequate as an answer to the question, “What is that inference?” So, we won’t escape the problem of triviality. But, if THE REVISED ADEQUACY CONDITION FOR ANSWERS is right, then an adequate answer must indeed be informative in the context of conversation. What makes an answer informative? If INFORMATIVITY I is right, then even trivial answers will count as informative in a context of conversation, so the problem of triviality will remain intact. If INFORMATIVITY II is correct, then in asking the question, “What is that inference?” what the atheist really intends to ask is a multiple-choice question of the form, “Is it inference *A*, or inference *B*, or inference *C*, or . . .?” But, if the atheist were in fact to ask that multiple choice question, then, in reply, the theist could easily select one of the listed options as their preferred answer. And this process could continue until the atheist themselves pins down the inference that establishes the Lord’s existence without much help from the theist.

### 2.3 Summary

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<sup>23</sup> KKḥ §3.5: *atha manyase kim iha pramāṇam iti prcchato ’yam abhiprāyaḥ--atrārthe ’numānaṃ pramāṇam itarad veti? tatrāpy anumānam ity uttaram asmākam | kiṃ tad anumānam iti cet, ayam api praśno ’numānamātraviśayaḥ, uta tadviśeṣaviśaya iti vikalpya pramāṇapraśnavad uttaram vācyam iti |*

What Śrīharṣa is offering us here is a recipe for evading evidence-seeking “what”-questions. In a nutshell, the problem is this: anyone who asks a question that takes the form, “What is *o*?” faces a dilemma. Through their question, they are expressing either (a) a desire for an awareness of an entity *o*, or (b) a desire for the capacity to discriminate *o* from other salient alternatives. If option (a) is right, then the trivial answer “*o*” itself should suffice; for that is sufficient to satisfy the questioner’s desire. For, in uttering the question, “What is *o*?” the questioner themselves has picked out, by means of the expression “*o*,” the very intentional object that their question is directed at. So, the respondent too can produce an awareness regarding the same intentional object by using the same expression again. Towards the end of his discussion of the problem of triviality, Śrīharṣa summarises this idea through two verses.

If an opponent has articulated (*nirvakti*) by means of a certain expression a certain intentional object of a certain kind for their own question, then that object of that kind should be stated by the respondent too in exactly that way by means of that very expression.

If something is the intentional object of a question, that should be stated [in reply]. And, by that expression, this object would be articulated. [For] you yourself—insofar as you express the intentional object of your own question—have admitted this through your own utterance.<sup>24</sup>

However, if (b) is correct, then the questioner shouldn’t be satisfied with this trivial answer, since what they desire is the capacity to discriminate *o* from other salient alternatives. But, then, according to Śrīharṣa, what they should instead ask is a multiple-choice question that takes the form, “Is *o* *x*, or *y*, or *z*, or...?” where *x*, *y*, *z*, and so on are the contextually salient alternatives. And, if they were to ask such multiple-choice questions, then they themselves, rather than their interlocutor, would be taking on the burden of doing all the non-trivial epistemic work so that their interlocutor can take their pick amongst *x*, *y*, *z*,... In either case, asking these inquiry-initiating “what”-questions is futile: at least, in the context of a debate, they put no pressure on their addressee to undertake any non-trivial epistemic work.

The challenge here is to spell out a satisfactory notion of informativity that (i) rules out trivial answers to “what”-questions, but (ii) doesn’t make “what”-questions replaceable in all contexts by multiple-choice questions. I am not sure exactly how to do this. But one possible way of partially meeting this challenge will be to argue that an informative answer to a “what”-question is one that gives the questioner some kind of knowledge that they didn’t possess earlier. But the answer

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<sup>24</sup> KKh §3.5: *atra ca saṃgrahaślokaḥ—yathāvidhaṃ yaṃ viśayaṃ nijasya praśnasya nirvakti paro yathoktyā | vācyas tathāivottaravādīnā ’pi tayaiḥ vācā sa tathāvidho ’rthaḥ || praśnasya yaḥ syād viśayaḥ sa vācya vācā caiṣa bhaven niruktaḥ | idaṃ tvayā ’py āsthītam etayaiḥ girā svapṛcchāviśayasya vaktrā ||*

needn't necessarily do this by helping the questioner to distinguish the right answer from other alternatives that were salient to them. Here is a sketch of such a proposal:

INFORMATIVITY III. An answer to a “what”-question about an object *o* is sufficiently informative in a context of conversation only if it helps the questioner learn something about *o* that they didn't know earlier.

Together with THE REVISED ADEQUACY CONDITION FOR ANSWERS, this will imply that an adequate answer to a “what”-question about *o* must not only correctly state (or pick out) *o*, but must also yield new knowledge about *o*. This seems plausible: when someone asks, “What is *o*?” what they seek is not any arbitrary state of awareness that correctly represents *o*, rather than a state of awareness that serves as a source of previously unpossessed knowledge with respect to *o*. This proposal has two important features. First, it implies that a trivial answer cannot be treated as an adequate answer to such a question, because such an answer yields no new knowledge at all about the relevant object of inquiry. Second, it needn't necessarily make “what”-questions replaceable by multiple-choice questions in *all* contexts. Consider a context where the questioner is clueless: there are no contextually salient alternatives that, by their lights, could satisfy the description “*o*.” In such a context, the questioner can still ask, “What is *o*?” for the sake of gaining new knowledge, even though they cannot articulate a corresponding multiple-choice question. For instance, you might ask me, “What is the capital of India?” even though there are no salient places in India that, by your lights, could be the capital of India. So, you cannot formulate a multiple-choice question “Is the capital of India Chennai or Kolkata or...?” Yet, you can clearly ask this “what”-question for the sake of enriching your existing body of knowledge about the capital of India.

While this proposal looks promising, we shall see why Śrīharṣa's second paradox—the paradox of inquiry—shows that this line of response cannot succeed.

#### **4. The Paradox of Incoherence**

The second paradox that Śrīharṣa poses is substantially different from the first one: it arises from his argument that the atheist shouldn't—on pain of incoherence—ask the question, “What is the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord's existence?” As I shall show, this paradox bears some similarity to Kripke's (2011) dogmatism paradox, and rules out the possibility of certain kinds of philosophical debates.

##### *3.1 The Dilemma*

Śrīharṣa frames the paradox in the form of a dilemma.

Moreover, on the basis of the expression “what” that has a question as its meaning, the status of some object as an intentional object of a desire for awareness is apprehended. And a desire for awareness is a desire to be aware. And a desire doesn’t arise with respect to something that isn’t an object of awareness, because that would lead to a problem of overgeneration. Therefore, the person who desires to be aware of the source of knowledge with respect to the existence of the Lord should describe their own awareness, which serves as the cause for their desire. Would that awareness be inaccurate, or accurate?<sup>25</sup>

Śrīharṣa presupposes the following principle.

THE DESIRE-AWARENESS PRINCIPLE. For any object of inquiry *o*, if an agent desires to be aware of *o*, then they must antecedently be aware of *o*.

By THE QUESTION-DESIRE PRINCIPLE, the atheist’s question, “What is the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord’s existence?” expresses a desire for awareness about the source of knowledge that establishes the Lord’s existence. Then, by THE DESIRE-AWARENESS PRINCIPLE, the atheist must be antecedently aware of the source of knowledge that establishes the Lord’s existence. Śrīharṣa’s claim is that this desire for awareness cannot arise with respect to an intentional object unless one is already aware of that intentional object. This seems plausible: I can’t desire to become aware of virtue (in a specific manner) unless I have *some* awareness of virtue. Analogously, the atheist cannot desire to be aware of the source of knowledge that establishes the Lord’s existence unless they are already in some way aware of that source of knowledge. There are only three ways in which one could come to know the Lord’s existence: perception, inference, and testimony. So, someone who asks which source of knowledge establishes the Lord’s existence should—or at least should be able to—imagine or conceive a state of affairs where one of these sources of knowledge serves as proof for the Lord’s existence. In other words, they must (be able to) undergo a state of imaginative awareness that represents a state of affairs where a source of knowledge establishes the Lord’s existence. The question for the atheist, then, is this. Is that state of awareness accurate (*yathārtha*) or inaccurate (*ayathārtha*)?

The atheist cannot say that the awareness in question is accurate. Śrīharṣa explains:

If it is accurate, then, by means of that very awareness, its own intentional object—the source of knowledge [that establishes the Lord’s existence]—is put forward; for one cannot say that it is accurate without there being an operation of a source of knowledge with respect to the [relevant] intentional object. By that source of knowledge, again, its

<sup>25</sup> KK<sub>h</sub> §3.6: *praśnārthāc ca kiṃśabdāt jijñāsāviṣayātā ṛthasya pratīyate | jijñāsā ca jñātum icchā | icchā ca nājñāte bhavati, atiprasaṅgāt | tasmād īśvaraviṣayaṃ pramāṇaṃ jñātum icchatā tatra svajñānam icchākāraṇābhūtaṃ vaktavyam | tad ayathārthaṃ yathārthaṃ vā syāt?*

intentional object—the existence of the Lord—is put forward. Thus, without any effort at all, our wish to establish the Lord is fulfilled.<sup>26</sup>

Suppose the atheist concedes that she can imagine a state of affairs where a source of knowledge establishes the existence of the Lord. If that state of imaginative awareness is accurate, i.e., correctly represents the way the world is, then there will indeed be a source of knowledge that establishes the existence of the Lord. But, if there is such a source of knowledge, the Lord must indeed exist. So, the atheist will be committed to the Lord’s existence. Thus, the theist, without putting in any effort at all, will have arrived at their desired outcome: namely, of getting the atheist to admit that the Lord exists.

This result obviously will be anathema to the atheist. Since they are certain that the Lord doesn’t exist, they should say that any state of awareness that represents a source of knowledge as proof for the Lord’s existence is inaccurate. Given this, it is unclear what the atheist wants from the theist when they ask, “What is the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord’s existence?” There are two salient options.

*Option 1.* The atheist is certain that their awareness regarding the source of knowledge that establishes the Lord’s existence is inaccurate, but they want the theist to produce yet another *inaccurate* state of awareness about the same intentional object.

*Option 2.* The atheist is certain that their awareness regarding the source of knowledge that establishes the Lord’s existence is false, but they want the theist to produce an *accurate* state of awareness about the same intentional object.

Śrīharṣa argues that neither of these options should be attractive to the atheist.

Consider *Option 1*.

Suppose [that awareness] is inaccurate. If what you as a questioner want is that, with respect to this intentional object of an inaccurate awareness, we should produce just [another] inaccurate awareness, then what’s the point of depending on others for a purpose that is within your own power? Just as you yourself—who are skilled at producing states of inaccurate awareness—have given rise to a false awareness with respect to that [intentional object], so also should you produce another [false awareness].

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<sup>26</sup> KKCh §3.6: *yathārthaṃ cet, tarhi tenaiva jñānena svakīyo viśayaḥ pramāṇam upasthāpyate, viśaye pramāṇapravṛttim antareṇa tadīyayathārthatvasya vaktum aśakyatvāt | tenāpi pramāṇena svagocara īśvarasadbhāva upasthāpyata ity anāyāsenaiḥ siddho ’smākam īśvarasiddhīmanorathaḥ |*

In contrast, how might we—who are producers of accurate awareness and are [thus] completely inept when it comes to false awareness—apply ourselves here?<sup>27</sup>

Given that the atheist themselves is capable of *falsely* imagining a source of knowledge that establishes the Lord’s existence, they need no help from the theist in producing such a false state of awareness. So, it makes no sense for the atheist to ask the theist to bring about such a false state of awareness in them. Thus, Śrīharaṣa asks, “What’s the point of depending on others for a purpose that is within your own power?” The atheist has themselves confessed that they have undergone an inaccurate state of awareness about the source of knowledge that establishes the Lord’s existence. In contrast, the theist has confessed no such thing; in fact, they have claimed that their awareness regarding this subject-matter is accurate. So, clearly, the atheist is better suited for the job of producing another inaccurate awareness regarding the same subject-matter.

A more promising way of interpreting the atheist’s question will be to take it as an expression of a different desire: the desire that the theist should produce an *accurate* state of awareness regarding the source of knowledge that proves the Lord’s existence. This fits the view that we ended up with in §2: namely, when the atheist asks, “What is the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord’s existence?” what they express is a desire to gain previously unpossessed knowledge—perhaps through an accurate state of awareness—about the source of knowledge that proves the Lord’s existence. But this is an impossible task by lights of the atheist themselves. The atheist doesn’t just think that their *own* awareness regarding the source of knowledge that proves the Lord’s existence is inaccurate, but rather is certain that *any arbitrary* state of awareness that represents a source of knowledge as proof for the Lord’s existence is false. Thus, if they genuinely want the theist to produce a state of awareness that accurately portrays a source of knowledge as proof for the Lord’s existence, then they are asking for something that is impossible by their own lights. Śrīharaṣa explains the point as follows.

Suppose what you want is this: “Whatever is the intentional object of my inaccurate awareness, that should be turned into an intentional object of my accurate awareness by you.” Then, due to a contradiction, your undertaking towards this sort of purpose will itself be unreasonable. Why would a prudent person make any effort for the sake of the purpose, “May a mother-of-pearl become an intentional object of my accurate awareness under the guise of being silver”? For there is a contradiction in something’s being an intentional object of an accurate awareness in exactly the same way in which it has become the intentional object of an inaccurate awareness.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> KKh §3.6: *athāyathārtham, tatrāsmīn ayathārthajñānaviśaye yady asmābhīr ayathārtham eva jñānam utpādanīyam iti bhavataḥ pṛechato vāñcītam tadā keyaṃ svādīne ṛthe parāpekṣā? bhavān eva ayathārthajñānotpādanakuśalo yathaikaṃ tatra mithyājñānam ajījanat, tathā param apy utpādayatu | vāyam punar yathārthajñānasyoṭpādayitāro mithyājñāne sarvathavākṛtinaḥ kim iha nīyujyemahīti |*

<sup>28</sup> KKh §3.6: *atha madīyasyāyathārthajñānasya yo viśayaḥ saḥ madīyayathārthajñānaviśayo bhavatā kriyatām iti tvadīyam vāñcītam, tadā vyāghātāt īdrīṣy arthe bhavataḥ pravṛttir evānupapannā | śūktikā rajatatvena yathārthajñānaviśayo bhavatu ity etadarthaṃ pṛekṣāvān kathamkāraṃ prayateta? yena rūpeṇāyathārthajñānaviśayatvaṃ tenaiva rūpeṇa yathārthajñānaviśayatve vyāghātāt |*

The example is useful. For the atheist, any state of awareness that represents a source of knowledge as proof for the Lord's existence is like a state of awareness that erroneously portrays a mother-of-pearl as a piece of silver. Therefore, to want the theist to produce a state of accurate awareness with that very content is to desire a state of accurate awareness that portrays the mother-of-pearl as a silver. Since such a desire involves a contradiction, no prudent person will act on such a desire. So, the atheist too shouldn't ask the theist the question, "What is the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord's existence?" on the basis of such a desire.

Here is a natural way of reconstructing Śrīharṣa's argument.

P1\*. In a debate between the theist and the atheist about the existence of the Lord, the atheist is certain that the Lord doesn't exist.

P2\*. If the atheist is certain that the Lord doesn't exist, then they must be certain that there is no source of knowledge that proves that the Lord exists.

P3\*. If the atheist must be certain that there is no source of knowledge that proves that the Lord exists, then they cannot coherently desire an accurate state of awareness that represents a source of knowledge as proof for the Lord's existence.

P4\*. If the atheist cannot coherently desire an accurate state of awareness that represents a source of knowledge as proof for the Lord's existence, they shouldn't ask the question, "What is the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord's existence?"

C\*. Therefore, in a debate between the theist and the atheist about the existence of the Lord, the atheist shouldn't ask the question, "What is the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord's existence?"

The similarity between this argument and the argument that drives Kripke's (2011) dogmatism paradox is unmistakable. Kripke's paradox involves knowledge rather than certainty. The reasoning goes like this. If an agent knows  $P$ , then they know that any evidence against  $P$  (i.e., any evidence that will rationally undermine their belief in  $P$ ) is misleading. So, if this agent cares only about having a true belief in  $P$ , then they should resolve either not to look for such evidence or not to change their mind about  $P$  once they receive such evidence. This is paradoxical, since this kind of resolution—of not looking for further evidence, and of not being moved by counterevidence—seems dogmatic and therefore unreasonable (at least in some cases). In contrast, Śrīharṣa is concerned with the context of a philosophical debate where the two interlocutors are certain of two incompatible theses: one is certain in  $P$ , while the other is certain in  $\sim P$ . In such a context, the claim goes, the defender of  $\sim P$  shouldn't ask, "What is the source of knowledge that proves  $P$ ?" The defender of  $\sim P$  should ask this question only if they can coherently have a desire to be accurately aware of a source of knowledge that proves  $P$ . But, since the defender of  $\sim P$  is (or should be) certain that there cannot be any such accurate awareness, they cannot coherently have that desire. So, they shouldn't ask such an evidence-seeking question. This is paradoxical, since we genuinely do think that it is permissible to ask—and do

ourselves ask—such evidence-seeking questions in the context of philosophical debates. This is the paradox of incoherence.

The argument isn't restricted to "what"-questions of this sort; it can be generalized to other evidence-seeking questions like, "How do you know  $P$ ?" or "What is the evidence for  $P$ ?" On a natural reading, these are questions about a way of coming to know  $P$ , and about evidence that shows that  $P$  is true. Given that the defender of  $\sim P$  is certain in  $\sim P$ , they must be certain that there is no way of knowing  $P$ , and that there is no evidence that shows that  $P$  is true. So, they cannot coherently have a desire to be accurately aware of a way of knowing  $P$  or any non-misleading evidence for  $P$ . So, they cannot coherently have the desire to gain an accurate state of awareness about there being a way of knowing  $P$ , or about there being any non-misleading evidence for  $P$ . So, they shouldn't ask evidence-seeking questions of this sort.

### 3.2 *Objections and Replies*

Śrīharṣa goes on to entertain two possible responses to this argument. The first involves rejecting P4\*, while the second involves rejecting P1\*.

#### 3.2.1 *Rejecting P4\**

Start with the first response. P4\* says that, if the atheist cannot coherently desire an accurate state of awareness that represents a source of knowledge as proof for the Lord's existence, then they shouldn't ask the evidence-seeking "what"-question that they pose. But this claim is questionable. The theist has acknowledged their commitment (*siddhānta*) to the existence of the Lord. In virtue of this commitment, they have incurred a further obligation to show that there is a source of knowledge that proves the existence of the Lord. The question, "What is the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord's existence?" simply expresses a desire for them to fulfil that obligation. Śrīharṣa has his opponent express this worry.

Suppose you think: "You—who conform to your own commitments—should produce an accurate awareness with respect to that [putative source of knowledge with respect to the Lord's existence]. So, for that reason, you are being questioned."<sup>29</sup>

In other words, the question that the atheist asks the theist should be interpreted as elliptical: in fact, it is the question, "What is the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord's existence *according to you*?" The atheist wants the theist to *show* them which source of knowledge—*according to the theist, given their commitments*—proves the Lord's existence. This desire is compatible with the atheist's certainty that the theist is wrong, i.e., that there is no source of knowledge that proves

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<sup>29</sup> KKCh §3.7: *atha manyase—vasiddhāntam anurundhānena bhavatā yathārthajñānaṃ tatrotpādanīyam, atas tadarthaṃ bhavan anyuyajata iti* |

the Lord's existence. Since it is indeed coherent for the atheist to have this desire, it is permissible for the atheist to ask this question. So, P4\* is false.

Śrīharṣa denies that the theist has the obligation that the atheist attributes to them.

This is not so. We don't have any commitment of the following sort: "We should demonstrate that the fake source of knowledge with respect to the existence of the Lord—which you have apprehended by mistake as a source of knowledge—has the status of being a source of knowledge." Rather, we should establish the source of knowledge with respect to the existence of the Lord—which you have apprehended by mistake to be a fake source of knowledge—to be a source of knowledge.<sup>30</sup>

The atheist is certain that any putative source of knowledge that the theist cites in favour of the Lord's existence is only a fake source of knowledge (*pramāṇābhāsa*). So, when the atheist asks the question, "What is the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord's existence according to you?", whatever they intend to pick out by means of the definite description "the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord's existence according to you" must be a fake source of knowledge by their own lights. For example, it may be a fallacious argument that purports to prove the Lord's existence, but in fact fails to do so. Such a fake source of knowledge cannot be shown to be a genuine source of knowledge. So, the theist has no obligation to perform the impossible task of showing that a fake source of knowledge is a genuine source of knowledge. In fact, as Śrīharṣa notes, the theist is committed to the view that there *is* a genuine source of knowledge that establishes the Lord's existence, a source of knowledge that the atheist (due to some confusion) has mistaken to be a fake source of knowledge. So, they have an obligation to show that a genuine source of knowledge—which the atheist has mistaken to be a fake source of knowledge—proves the Lord's existence. Though Śrīharṣa doesn't say this, it should be clear to us by now that the atheist, given their own commitments, cannot recognize this obligation. Since they are certain that there cannot be any source of knowledge that proves the Lord's existence, they must also be certain that it is impossible for the theist to show that there is such a source. So, they must admit that the theist has no obligation to show that there is such a source of knowledge (since, in general, no one has any obligation to perform impossible tasks).

In response, the atheist might explore a different strategy for rejecting P4\*. So far, the problem has been that the atheist, given their own commitments, is certain that whatever putative source of knowledge the theist might cite in favour of the Lord's existence can only be a fake source of knowledge. That is why they cannot coherently ask the theist to produce an *accurate* state of awareness that represents a source of knowledge as proof for the Lord's existence. To avoid this

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<sup>30</sup> KK<sub>h</sub> §3.7: *maivam, ya īśvarasadbhāvaviśayo bhavatā pramāṇābhāsaḥ pramāṇatayā bhrāntyā pratītaḥ, tasya pramāṇatvam asmābhir vyutpādanīyam iti nāsmākaṃ īdṛśaḥ siddhāntaḥ | pratyuteśvarasadbhāvaviśayaṃ yat pramāṇam bhavatā pramāṇābhāsatvena bhrāntyā pratītam asti tat pramāṇanīyam iti |*

charge of incoherence, the atheist could say that they only want the theist to *convey to them* a putative source of knowledge that proves the Lord’s existence. But they don’t yet wish to take a stance on whether this putative source of knowledge is a genuine source of knowledge, or not. Thus, they don’t want the theist to undertake the impossible task of showing that a fake source of knowledge is a genuine source of knowledge (or vice-versa).

Let this be the view: “We who are asking the question desire that you would merely convey a source of knowledge with respect to the Lord’s existence. But we don’t desire [to accept] any specific characteristic [of that putative source of knowledge], i.e., that it is a source of knowledge, or that it is not a source of knowledge.”<sup>31</sup>

Śrīharṣa argues that this strategy is too unconstrained, because this desire can be fulfilled too easily.

No, since that task of merely conveying can be accomplished even by a state of awareness that isn’t a source of knowledge. So, in reply to that response, the statement, “What’s the point of depending on other for a purpose that is within one’s power?” should be repeated.<sup>32</sup>

If the atheist is merely asking the theist to convey to them a putative source of knowledge with respect to the Lord’s existence, the theist can simply accomplish this task by telling a lie, e.g., by falsely stating that a certain argument—which is blatantly fallacious—proves the Lord’s existence. Such a statement will only give rise an inaccurate state of awareness in the atheist. But, surely, even the atheist can invent such fallacious arguments for the Lord’s existence. So, again, they don’t need any help from the theist with respect to this. The atheist’s question only makes sense if it is taken to express a desire that the theist *show* them that a source of knowledge serves as proof for the existence of the Lord. But the atheist, as we have seen, cannot coherently have this desire.

### 3.2.2 Rejecting P1\*

The atheist could reject P1\*. Śrīharṣa has been working with the assumption that the atheist—in virtue of their status as an atheist—is certain that there is no source of knowledge that proves the Lord’s existence is false. But the atheist might claim that they are not certain about this. They have imagined a state of affairs where some source of knowledge—like perception, inference, or testimony—proves the existence of the Lord. But they are unsure about whether this imaginative awareness is accurate or not. So, they are seeking the theist’s help in dispelling that uncertainty.

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<sup>31</sup> KKḥ §3.7: *syān matam īśvarasadbhāvaviśayasya pramāṇasya bhavatā jñāpanamātraṃ kriyatām ity abhimatam asmākam, na tu pramāṇenāpramāṇena veti viśeṣo ’bhīmata iti* |

<sup>32</sup> KKḥ §3.7: *na, jñāpanamātrasyāpramāṇajñānam ādāyāpy upapattēḥ | tatra svādhīne keyaṃ parāpekṣetyādy anuṣāñjanīyam iti* |

Let this be the case: “We have the following uncertainty: Is this very awareness—which has arisen for us with respect to the Lord’s existence—erroneous or true? For that reason, there is no room for this objection that you have stated, which depends on [our] having determined one of these alternatives [to be true].”<sup>33</sup>

However, as Śrīharṣa notes, the atheist cannot say this without relinquishing their position as an adversary in a (truth-directed or victory-directed) debate about the Lord’s existence.

This is not the case. For, if this were so, due to [your] uncertainty about the accuracy and the inaccuracy of that awareness, this question would belong to you who uncertain about the existence of the Lord, which in turn is the intentional object of the source of knowledge that is the intentional object of that awareness. But it wouldn’t be a question of someone who disagrees. And so, assume the status of a disciple and please us a while through services at our feet. We shall uproot your uncertainty.<sup>34</sup>

In a truth-directed or victory-directed debate about a thesis *P*, the two participants must disagree: one of the participants must be certain in the thesis *P*, while the other must be certain in the anti-thesis  $\sim P$ . If the atheist is to be believed, then, in this case, even though the theist is certain about the existence of the Lord, the atheist is uncertain. So, there is no disagreement between the two. Śrīharṣa follows up this initial observation with a deeper recommendation: given that the atheist is in fact not an atheist at all, but rather agnostic about the Lord’s existence, they shouldn’t enter the arena of a truth-directed or victory-directed debate at all. Rather, they should take up the tutelage of the theist and thereby learn about the different arguments for the Lord’s existence.

In response to this worry, the atheist might say that, when they ask, “What is the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord’s existence?” they are not genuinely uncertain about the Lord’s existence. But, rather, they pretend to be uncertain for the purposes of asking that evidence-seeking question. So, their uncertainty is an *adopted* or *artificial* state of awareness (*āhāryajñāna*).

[The atheist:] We indeed disagree. But our state of uncertainty is artificial.

[Reply:] In that case, the following would be said: “We—who have in fact determined one of the alternatives [to be correct]—are adopting a state of uncertainty for the sake of undertaking a task.” Therefore, that very determination is to be refuted by means of the

<sup>33</sup> KKh §3.8: *syād etat | yeyam īśvarasadbhāvaviśayaḥ pramāṇapratītir asmākam utpannā sā vyabhicāriṇī satyā veti saṁśayo ’brāsmākam tenaikapakṣanirddharaṇādñānam yad idaṁ dūṣaṇam avādi bhavatā tan nīravakāśam iti |*

<sup>34</sup> KKh §3.8: *naitad asti | evaṁ hi tasyāṁ pratītau yathārthatvāyathārthatvasaṁśayena tasyāḥ pratīter gocaro yat pramāṇaṁ tasyāḥpi yo ’sau viśaya īśvarasadbhāvas tatra sarvatraiva saṁśayānasya bhavataḥ praśno ’yam na tu vipratīpannasyeti syāt tathā ca svīkuru śīṣyabhāvaṁ, prasādaya ciraṁ caraṇasūśraṣābhīr asmān, chetsyāmas te saṁśayam iti |*

forementioned argument by putting forward the alternatives, “Is it accurate, or inaccurate?”<sup>35</sup>

This response takes us back to the original problem that Śrīharṣa was posing for the atheist. Even if the atheist’s uncertainty is artificial, they must admit that, as an atheist, they have determined that the Lord doesn’t exist. But then they will face the same dilemma again. Is that determination accurate or inaccurate? If the atheist admits that it is inaccurate, then the theist wins. If it is accurate, then the atheist must also have accurately determined that there is no source of knowledge that proves the Lord’s existence. Thus, in asking the theist to produce an accurate state of awareness about such a source of knowledge, they are asking the theist to do what is impossible by their own lights. Thus, the atheist won’t escape the problem of incoherence.

Similarly, the atheist cannot say that, when they imagine a source of knowledge that proves the Lord’s existence, they do so by way of suspending judgement about whether the imaginative awareness is accurate or not.

It is to be understood that, by this reasoning, the following is refuted: “That [putative source of knowledge] has been apprehended by us by way of suspending judgement (*anadhyavasāyena*).” This is because that [response] too is subject to the two alternatives, “Does that [apprehension] have an erroneous content, or does it have a non-erroneous content?” given the principle that, “When there is mutual contradiction [between two alternatives], there is no other way for things to be.”<sup>36</sup>

Irrespective of whether the atheist suspends judgement about whether their imaginative awareness is accurate or inaccurate (while asking the evidence-seeking question), they can legitimately be asked whether that awareness is erroneous or accurate. These are the only two ways that this state of awareness can be by their lights. If they say that it is accurate, they will relinquish their status as an atheist. If they say that it is erroneous, the charge of incoherence will remain intact. Thus, the problem of incoherence will persist.

### 3.3 Summary

Let’s take stock. Śrīharṣa has argued that the atheist shouldn’t ask the evidence-seeking questions like, “What is the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord’s existence?” The reasoning is simple. In the context of a truth-directed or victory-directed debate about the existence of the

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<sup>35</sup> KKh §3.8: *vīpratīpannā eva vāyam | āhāryaḥ saṁśayo ’smākam iti cet | tarhy avadhītaikakoṭaya eva vāyam kāryānurodhāt tu saṁśayam ālambāmana ity uktam syāt | evaṁ tarhi tad eva kotyavadhāraṇam bhavatām yathārtham ayathārtham veti vikalpyoktayuktyā dūṣaṇīyam |*

<sup>36</sup> KKh §3.9: *etenānadhyavasāyena tad asmābhiḥ pratīpannam ity api nirastaṁ veditavyam | vyabhicāriṣayam avyābhicāroṣayam vā tad iti vikalpābhyām tasyāpi grastatvāt “prasparaviroghe hi na prakāvēntarasthitir” iti nyāyāt |* The principle in question is given by the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika thinker Udayana in *The Flower-Offering of Arguments* (*Nyāyakusumāñjali*) v. 3.8cd.

Lord, the two participants will disagree: the theist will be certain that the Lord exists, while the atheist will be certain that the Lord's doesn't exist. Given this state of certainty, the atheist must also be certain that there is no genuine source of knowledge that proves the Lord's existence. So, they cannot coherently desire that the theist show them that there is such a source of knowledge. In the absence of such a desire, the atheist shouldn't ask the question, "What is the source of knowledge with respect to the Lord's existence?"

This is significant. This blocks the possibility that was left open at the end of §2: namely, that a trivial answer to this evidence-seeking question won't be adequate, because, in asking this question, the atheist is expressing a desire to gain new knowledge of a source of knowledge that proves the Lord's existence. But if, by the atheist's own lights, there cannot be any such source of knowledge, that desire becomes incoherent, and the question becomes impermissible to ask. The problem, as Śrīharṣa argues, cannot be escaped by reinterpreting the question, so that it is now understood as a request for the theist to cite a source of knowledge that proves the Lord's existence according to them. Nor can the atheist simply say that, when they ask this question, they are uncertain about the Lord's existence.

Śrīharṣa's paradox of incoherence has an important feature. If his argument is sound, then, in the context of any debate that is *based on a disagreement*, one shouldn't ask evidence-seeking questions like, "What is the source of knowledge with respect to *P*?" As we've seen, truth-directed and victory-directed debates are based on disagreements, but destructive debates aren't. So, the paradox of incoherence leaves open the possibility that a destructive debater who doesn't explicitly take a stance on *P* or  $\sim P$  can ask such evidence-seeking questions. This is important for Śrīharṣa; for, in the *Refutation*, he is engaged in precisely this kind of destructive debate against his Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika opponent.

## 5. Anti-Rationalism

The paradox of incoherence is closely connected to Śrīharṣa's ANTI-RATIONALISM: the view that there cannot be any successful rational inquiry into the question of what ultimately exists. To see where the connection lies, it might be worth surveying Śrīharṣa's positive philosophical views.

At a crucial juncture in the first chapter of the *Refutation*, Śrīharṣa explicitly distances himself from Mādhyamika Buddhists. Both the non-dualistic Vedāntin and the Mādhyamika are anti-realists. The Mādhyamika is a *global* anti-realist: they reject the ultimate existence of everything that we can be aware of. But the Vedāntin is only a *local* anti-realist: they reject the ultimate existence of everything but consciousness. In the first chapter of the *Refutation*, Śrīharṣa says:

And if such is the case, the following is the distinction between the Buddhist and the Vedāntin: namely, that the former describes everything as indescribable (*anirvacanīya*). That has been said by the Blessed One [i.e., the Buddha] in *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*:

The intrinsic nature of objects that are analysed by the intellect isn't determined. This is why they are taught to be ineffable and without an intrinsic nature.

However, the Vedāntins proclaim that this world beyond consciousness is distinct from what is existent and what is non-existent. That is to say: it cannot be existent, because it is subject to the refutations that will be stated later. It also isn't simply non-existent; for, if that were the case, there would be the undesirable consequence that all practices of ordinary people as well as inquirers would be contradicted.<sup>37</sup>

The senses in which things are indescribable according to the Mādhyamika and the non-dualistic Vedāntin are different. For the Mādhyamika, nothing that we subject to rational investigation can be determined to have an *intrinsic nature*, the kind of independent being that only ultimately existent objects are supposed to have. That's the sense in which they are indescribable. By contrast, the non-dualistic Vedāntin, who is committed to the ultimate existence of consciousness, thinks that the world beyond consciousness is indescribable in a different sense: it can be treated neither as existent nor as non-existent. It cannot be treated as existent, because, as Śrīharṣa intends to show, there is a plethora of *refutation-arguments* (*khaṇḍanayukti*) that rebut any evidence that we might have for treating it as existent. It cannot be treated as completely non-existent either. As Śrīharṣa notes, we are able to successfully perform our ordinary activities only on the assumption that the world beyond consciousness exists; if we rejected the existence of the world beyond consciousness, we wouldn't be able to perform those activities at all. Thus, the world beyond consciousness has a kind of *transactional, practical existence* (*vyāvahārikī sattā*) in virtue of being practically indispensable, even though it cannot be regarded as *ultimately existent*, i.e., existent independent of our attitudes like beliefs, desires, and judgements.

On Śrīharṣa's view, when the non-dualistic Vedāntin says that the world beyond consciousness is indescribable, they are not assigning a third ontological status to the world, i.e., some ontological status other than existence and non-existence. Rather, they are pointing out a structural limitation of the system of rational inquiry that his Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika opponents take to be suitable for discovering what ultimately exists. Śrīharṣa's aim in the *Refutation* is to show that, if we take the rules laid down in that system for granted, then the apparent world of consciousness-independent objects cannot be treated as ultimately existent, because it can be refuted according to the same rules. At the same time, it cannot be treated as completely non-existent, because, according to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika thinkers (who are staunch realists), something that is completely non-existent cannot appear as the intentional object of our experiences and thoughts and thereby give rise to actions. Thus, given the rules of their own system of rational inquiry,

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<sup>37</sup> KKh §1.89: *evaṅ ca sati saugatabrahmavādinor ayaṃ viśeṣo yad ādimaḥ sarvaṃ evānirvacanīyaṃ varṇayati | tad uktam bhagavatā lankāvatāre | "buddhyā vivicyamānānāṃ svabhāvo nāvadhāryate | ato nirabhilāpyās te nissvabhāvās ca deśitāḥ"* | | iti | vijñānavyatiriktam punar idaṃ viśvaṃ sadasadbhyāṃ vilakṣaṇaṃ brahmavādinah saṅgīrante | tathā hi nedaṃ sad bhavitum arhati, vaksyamānadūṣaṇagrastatvāt, nāpy asad eva, tathā sati laukikavicārakānāṃ sarvavyavahāravāhyāpatteḥ | |

since the world cannot be described as either existent or non-existent, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika thinkers must conclude that the world beyond consciousness is indescribable. Śrīharṣa explains:

However, this follows solely by means of the system set up by our opponent himself [i.e., the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika thinker]: “Since descriptions are rejected, [the world beyond consciousness] is indescribable.” For he accepts that, if one item belonging to a [contradictory] pair of an affirmation and its negation is rejected, the other follows. Therefore, in accordance with the method of our opponent, it is said: “The indescribability of the world follows.” In fact, we [i.e., the Vedāntins], who abstain from establishing the existence of the apparently manifold world (*prapañca*), have easily accomplished our aims by relying solely on the reality of *brahman*, which is proved by itself and which has the nature of consciousness.<sup>38</sup>

Unlike the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika thinkers, the non-dualistic Vedāntin doesn’t seek to determine—through rational inquiry—whether the apparent world of consciousness-independent objects is existent. They are happy simply to take for granted the view that *brahman*—which has the nature of consciousness and is self-revealing—is ultimately existent.

This, in turn, might prompt the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika thinkers to ask Śrīharṣa what source of knowledge establishes the non-dual nature of consciousness for him. To resist this question, Śrīharṣa poses a paradox similar to the paradox of incoherence.

[The opponent:] What is the source of knowledge with respect to non-duality?

[Reply:] First of all, this very question doesn't make sense for someone who doesn't countenance non-duality.<sup>39</sup>

Śrīharṣa explains the idea again by appealing to an analogue of the DESIRE-AWARENESS PRINCIPLE.

THE QUESTION-AWARENESS PRINCIPLE. For any object *o*, it is not appropriate for an agent to ask, “What is the source of knowledge with respect to *o*?” unless they are already aware of *o*.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> KKh §1.93: *parasyaiva tu vyavasthayaivaṃ paryavasyati—nirvacanapratikṣepād anirvacanīyatvam vidhīṣedhayor ekataranirāsasayetaraḥparyavasāyitāyās tenābhyupetatvāt | tataḥ parakīyārityedam ucyate—“anirvacanīyatvam viśvasya paryavasyati”ti | vastutas tu vāyam prapañcasattvavyavavasthāpanavinivṛttāḥ svataḥsidde cidātmani brahmatattve kevale bharam avalambya caritārthāḥ sukham āsmahe |*

<sup>39</sup> KKh §1.99: *nanv advaite kiṃ pramāṇam | praśna eva tāvad advaitam anaṅgīkurvato nopapadyate |*

<sup>40</sup> KKh §1.99: “And that question would make sense only if that sort of an intentional object were to appear in your awareness. This is because a question is a specific linguistic utterance and linguistic utterances are restricted to the contents (*viśaya*) of the states of awareness that produce them. Otherwise, since there couldn’t be anything else that allows for the restriction of linguistic utterances to their (own) contents, there would be the undesirable result that

So, it is not appropriate for Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika thinkers to ask the relevant question unless they are already aware of non-duality: at the very least, they must be able to imagine the intentional object with respect to which they are seeking a source of knowledge. Once again, there are just two possibilities: either that imaginative awareness of non-duality either constitutes or yields knowledge (*pramiti*) of non-duality, or it doesn't.<sup>41</sup> If it constitutes or yields knowledge of non-duality, then whatever method gives rise to that awareness of non-duality will be the source of knowledge with respect to non-duality. Presumably, if the opponent is a Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika thinker who rejects the non-dual nature of consciousness, they should say that the relevant awareness of non-duality doesn't constitute or yield any knowledge of non-duality; in fact, they should say that it is inaccurate. But, then, they cannot ask the non-dualist to show that there is source of knowledge with respect to what is in fact the content of an inaccurate awareness. This is just a version of the paradox of incoherence.

Śrīharṣa goes on to consider the same response to this problem that he considered earlier: given that the non-dualistic Vedāntin is committed to the non-dual nature of consciousness, they are obligated for citing a source of knowledge with respect to it. Śrīharṣa's first rejoinder to this is the same as earlier: even though the non-dualist is committed to the non-dual nature of consciousness, they have no obligation to show that the intentional object of the inaccurate awareness that their opponent undergoes can in fact be known.<sup>42</sup> But the second rejoinder is much more interesting:

Even if I were to accept non-duality, would the instrument that brings about that very awareness of yours necessarily be a source of knowledge simply in virtue of that? If someone, having apprehended mist as smoke, infers fire on a hill that in fact contains fire, is their awareness as of there being smoke, which has the mist as its intentional object, to be accepted as a source of knowledge merely because of this?<sup>43</sup>

The example Śrīharṣa has in mind is this.

*Mist and Fire.* I see what appears to be smoke emerging from a hill. I remember that wherever there is smoke, there is fire. So, I judge that there is fire on the hill. In fact, what I saw is just mist. But, luckily, there is fire on the hill.

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those linguistic utterances and their contents would be mixed up.” (*tac ca tadaivopapadyate yadi tādrśam te pratītim ārohet | praśnasya vāgyavahāraviśeṣatvāt vyavahārasya ca svajanakajñānaviśayaniyatatvāt | anyathā vyavahārānām viśayaniyamaprayojakasyānyasyāsambhavena vyavahāraviśayapāriplavāpatteḥ |*)

<sup>41</sup> See KKh §1.100-1.

<sup>42</sup> See KKh §1.101.

<sup>43</sup> KKh §1.101: *yadi nāma mayā advaitam abhyupeyate tāvatā kim tāvakīnasya tajjñānasya ka- raṇam avaśyaṃ pramāṇam syāt | vastuto vahnimaty api parvate yadi kaścid vāṣpaṃ dhūmaṃ pratītya tato vahnim anumīnoti tāvatā (kim) vāṣpaviśayam dhūmajñānam tatkaraṇam pramāṇam eṣṭavyam iti |*

This is a Gettier case. Elsewhere in *Refutation*, Śrīharṣa notes that, even though one's judgement in a case like this may be true, one doesn't acquire any knowledge in making this judgement.<sup>44</sup> Even if the opponent is somehow able to accurately imagine what non-duality is, that doesn't mean that there would be a source of knowledge corresponding to that accurate awareness.

The point generalises. For Śrīharṣa, from a conventional standpoint, the Upaniṣads may be treated as a source of knowledge with respect to the non-dual nature of consciousness. But, in the final analysis, they too don't yield any knowledge about how the world ultimately is. The Upaniṣads describe the nature of consciousness as non-dual, eternal, all-pervasive, and so on. In doing so, they ascribe properties like non-duality, eternality, and all-pervasiveness to it. But this is misleading: if consciousness alone ultimately exists, then there cannot ultimately exist any properties that are distinct from consciousness itself. Nor can there be any semantic relations that would connect the referring expressions of our language to the characteristics of consciousness that they seemingly pick out. So, the Upaniṣads—as far as their literal contents are concerned—cannot accurately describe the nature of consciousness. At best, they can figuratively describe what consciousness is, by *implying* what it is not. Śrīharṣa explains this idea as follows.

Therefore, experience (*anubhava*) isn't the intentional object of any linguistic usage that arises due to the apprehension of properties. On the basis of its not being temporally limited, it is figuratively called eternal. On the basis of its not being spatially limited, it is described as all-pervading. On the basis of the absence of any limitation imposed by qualifying characteristics, it is said to have the nature of everything, to be non-dual, and so on. Thus, this is revealed by implication—on the basis of the reasoning that applies to accidental features (*upalakṣaṇanyāyāt*)<sup>45</sup>—by the source of knowledge that is scripture [i.e., the Upaniṣads]. Therefore, given that ultimately there is no relation between referring expressions and their referents, in a state of ignorance, the scripture is said to be a source of knowledge with respect to consciousness in virtue of this implication, following the method accepted by others. In reality, the nature of consciousness is established by itself.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> See KKh §1.296.

<sup>45</sup> Śrīharṣa's commentator Śaṅkara Mīśra explains the reasoning as follows (KKhŚ 56.1-4). Suppose I am trying to find Devadatta's house. To help me, you say: "Devadatta's house is the one with the crows on it." Here, the presence of crows is used to identify Devadatta's house. However, the presence of crows isn't an essential characteristic of Devadatta's house, only an accidental one. It may even be the case that, at the time of your utterance, the crows are not even sitting on the house. Yet, when I hear your utterance, I can determine what it implies: namely, that you intend to convey some other characteristic of the house—e.g., the upturned grass on the thatched roof of the house—which is associated with the presence of crows. This characteristic is neither the literal meaning of any word in the sentence nor a part of the literal meaning conveyed by the sentence. Yet, I can determine that it is this characteristic that the speaker is implicitly appealing to. Using that characteristic, I can indeed then figure out which house belongs to Devadatta. The same, we might imagine, is the case with *brahman*.

<sup>46</sup> KKh §1.76-77: *ata eva dharmopagrahāpravarttiṣṇuvāgvyavahār[ā]viśayatvam | kālānavacchedam ādāya nityatopacārah | deśānavacchedam ādāya vibhūtvavyapadeśaḥ | prakāranāvacchedavirahanibandhanaś ca sarvātmavādvaitādīvyavahārah | tad etat śrūtyā pramaṇenopalakṣaṇanyāyāt tātparyataḥ prakāśyate | tena paramārthato 'bhīdhānābhīdheyabhāvavirahe tātparyataḥ śrutis tasmin avidyādaśāyām parābhīyupagamarītyā pramāṇam ity ucyate | vastutas tv ātmasiddham eva cidrūpam |*

For Śrīharṣa, we can only treat the Upaniṣads as a source of knowledge with respect to the nature of consciousness when we are ignorant of the true nature of consciousness; in fact, the nature of consciousness is revealed by itself. Yet, what the Upaniṣads tell us about consciousness by implication is useful. Śrīharṣa wants to claim that having faith (*śraddhā*) in the contents of the Upaniṣads clears room for a kind of non-conceptual—metaphysically and epistemically direct—awareness that gives us access to the non-dual nature of consciousness. How? When one has faith in the content of Upaniṣads, one doesn't just abandon one's belief in other competing pictures of ultimate reality, e.g., the Vaiśeṣika view on which there are many different kinds of ultimately existent entities. But one also comes to see that the literal contents of the Upaniṣads themselves cannot quite be right: if consciousness alone ultimately exists, then consciousness cannot really possess properties like eternality, all-pervasiveness and non-duality. Thus, Upaniṣads themselves, when taken seriously, function like a “self-detonating bomb”: they not only dismantle other false views about the world, but also the picture of the world that they literally convey.<sup>47</sup>

According to Śrīharṣa, as one continues to contemplate the contents of the Upaniṣads, one can—through these practices of contemplation—get rid of the ordinary experiences and thoughts that present the world as populated by mind-independent objects. And, then, one can finally become aware of the non-dual nature of consciousness in a direct manner. Śrīharṣa describes this process of epistemic transformation to his Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika opponent.

So, even though you are fond of revelling in ignorance, you should first of all have faith in this non-duality which is put forward by these arguments that are endowed with the characteristics of good arguments established on your own view. And, after that, as you inwardly desire to be aware of the nature of the highest self on the basis of this faith in the content of the Upaniṣads, you—when ordinary mental occurrences have been expelled from your consciousness—will become directly aware of that [nature] to which self-revealing awareness bears witness and which far surpasses the taste of honey.<sup>48</sup>

On Śrīharṣa's view, the only useful role that reason can play in this epistemic transformation is negative. Non-defective arguments—what Śrīharṣa calls “these arguments that are endowed with the characteristics of good arguments established on your own view”—help create the conditions for faith in the Upaniṣads. Such arguments only show us that there cannot be any defeater for the testimony given by the Upaniṣads, e.g., that the apparent multiplicity of mind-independent objects presented by our perceptual experiences cannot be treated as ultimately real. But these arguments cannot help us discover the nature of ultimate reality.

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<sup>47</sup> See KKh §1.131, and Ganeri (2007) for an exploration of this theme in the context of both Madhyamaka Buddhism and non-dualistic Vedānta.

<sup>48</sup> KKh §1.135: *tad idam etābhīr ātmamatasiddhasadyuktīlakṣaṇopapannābhīr yuktībhir upānīyamānam advaitam avidyāvīlāsālāso 'pi śraddadhātu bhavān | tadanu cānayaivaupāniṣadarthaśraddhayā 'dhyātmaṃ jījñāsamānaḥ paramātmattvam kramād vṛttivāvṛttacetāḥ svaprakāśasākṣikaṃ māḥṣikarāsātīśāyi svātmanaiva sakṣātkarisyate |*

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